

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000270

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAIN PROTESTS IRANIAN INTERFERENCE IN INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (b) (d)

11. (S) Summary. MFA MinState Abdel Ghaffar delivered a sharp message to the Ambassador February 27 outlining his government's deep concern about Iranian interference in Bahrain's internal affairs, which he said reached a zenith during recent Ashura celebrations. The MFA summoned the Iranian Ambassador the previous day to protest Iranian activities. Abdel Ghaffar also had harsh words for Shia opposition leader Ali Salman and leading Shia cleric Isa Qassim, calling the latter an agent of Iran. He also expressed concerns about presumed new Iraqi Prime Minister Ja'fari, saying he did not believe him when he said he wanted an inclusive government in Iraq. He worried that Shia governments in Iraq and Iran could be a dangerous development for Bahrain. While Bahrain has welcomed and supported the positive impact of a democratic, post-Saddam Iraq, this demarche is a reminder that Bahrain's leadership, already wary of Iran, is apprehensive about the possible impact that Shia success in Iraq might have in Bahrain as it loosens controls and moves towards democracy. End summary.

12. (S) Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Mohammed Abdel Ghaffar summoned the Ambassador February 27 to express his government's deep concern about growing Iranian interference in Bahrain's internal affairs. He accused Iran of using Bahrain's openness and democracy to penetrate into Shia society. He said the Iranians were operating smartly, for the most part not going through their Embassy in Bahrain. The zenith of these activities, he said, came during Ashura. While many Shia celebrated Ashura as a religious event, there are others who politicized the celebrations for their own gain (he cited as examples Shia opposition leader Ali Salman and leading Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim). During Ashura, pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei proliferated in Shia villages (more and larger than usual, he said). Even more worrisome, camps were set up to offer ideological training to youth. Calling these camps "very dangerous," he said that Bahraini authorities found in the camps Hizbollah logos as well as numerous American and Israeli flags drawn on the ground for people to stomp on.

13. (S) Abdel Ghaffar said that Foreign Minister Shaikh Mohammed had called in the Iranian Ambassador the previous day to "give him a strong message" and protest Iranian support for these activities. The Iranian Ambassador denied any Iranian involvement, Abdel Ghaffar stated, "but we know they are behind this." The Ambassador noted that there have been reports that the King might be traveling to Iran at some point. Abdel Ghaffar said that any thought of the King traveling to Iran is now off.

14. (S) Amplifying his accusations against Al-Wifaq (major Shia opposition society) leader Ali Salman and Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, Abdel Ghaffar stated that Al-Wifaq is affiliated with the Ulama conference under the presidency of Sheikh Isa Qassim and that Isa Qassim is an agent of Iran who believes that Iran should rule everywhere in the region. "He is a very dangerous man," he stated.

15. (C) Abdel Ghaffar stated that the leadership is considering what to do next. "We hate to take decisions to curb freedom of speech, and we will not do this. But we have to figure out how to deal with the radical Shia. He said he personally did not think that a lot of space should be given to religious groups in politics. "One of the problems with democracy in our region," he stated, "is that when you give people more freedom, bad groups can exploit this freedom for their own sectarian purposes." He cited the Arab Thought Forum, currently taking place in Bahrain under the chairmanship of Jordan's Prince Hassan, as an attempt to develop a counteracting voice of moderation in Islam. In his new concurrent position as Minister of Information, he hoped to similarly promote moderation through Bahrain's broadcast media.

16. (C) Although Bahrain's leadership has been supportive of developments in Iraq, Abdel Ghaffar raised concerns about the direction a Shia government there might take once it controls the government. He was particularly apprehensive about Ibrahim Al-Ja'fari if he became the new Prime Minister, noting that Da'wa was a radical Shia movement that has a message for the whole region. "I don't believe him for a second when he says everyone should participate," he said. "We have an expression in Arabic: I tell you what you want to

hear, and I hide in my heart what I plan to do." He maintained the hope that somehow Allawi could become Prime Minister. The Ambassador noted that Bahrain's leadership had been positively impressed with the moderate message that Abdel-Aziz Al-Hakim had brought to Bahrain several weeks ago, and wondered what had changed (given the primary role that Al-Hakim appeared to be continuing to play). Without directly answering, Abdel Ghaffar stated that he was concerned that Shia governments in Iraq and Iran could be a dangerous development for Bahrain.

17. (S) Comment: This unexpectedly strong demarche (which most certainly was not an Abdel Ghaffar message but reflected concerns of his superiors) on worries about the potential Shia threat in the region underscores the cross-cutting reactions in Bahrain, a Shia-majority country run by a Sunni royal family, as it faces the new reality in Iraq. On the one hand, the leadership welcomes and supports the positive impact a democratic, post-Saddam Iraq will bring to the region and Bahrain. There are already signs that the successful election in Iraq is helping push Shias who boycotted the last election into giving serious consideration to voting in the 2006 elections, a positive development for the government. And a stable, growing Iraq can only be good for a small country like Bahrain that will depend on the regional market for its long-term economic prospects. On the other hand, to varying degrees Sunnis in Bahrain, including in the royal family, remain extremely wary of Iran and wonder what impact the success of Shias in Iraq will have in Bahrain at a time when it is loosening controls and moving towards full democracy.

18. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.
MONROE